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ABSTRACT

Definitions, statistics, and problems of world refugees are presented in this document for high school global education classes. Although various agencies have determined different definitions of the term, the authors consider as refugees all those forced to flee their native land in order to survive. For most refugees the attraction of a higher standard of living is secondary to their sheer need to escape war, political or economic oppression, or natural disaster. Current statistics indicate that 80 percent of refugees end up in poorer third world countries rather than in wealthier countries or developed regions; most refugees are women and children under 15 years of age. Often, host governments turn back refugees or create squalid, crowded camps to contain them. Changes can be effected, for example, by a change in the current refugee policies of wealthy nations from foreign policy interests to humanitarian interests. The document contains a map charting the world refugee movement accompanied by statistics from the "World Pefugee Survey," (1981 and 1982), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. Ideas for action and a brief reference list are also included. (KC)

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WORLD REFUGEE CRISIS: WINNING THE GAME

FACTS FOR ACTION NO. 6

Jan 83

Oxfam America, Boston, MA

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Oxfam America
Facts For Action
An Oxfam America Educational Publication #6 25¢

World Refugee Crisis: Winning the Game

Lebanon, UNRWA/G. Nehmeh

"It is the refugee who reveals to us the defective society in which we live. He is a kind of mirror through whose suffering we can see the injustice, the oppression and the maltreatment of the powerless by the powerful"

(Melaku Kifle, All-Africa Council of Churches Refugee Secretary).

The powerful of the world play deadly political games with the lives of millions in the poor world. The world refugee crisis is one of those deadly games.

I. The Word Game

Determining who is a refugee is much more than a simple word game. When a government or an agency determines that someone is a refugee, that decision implies that the person will be treated according to certain minimum standards, and will be accorded certain basic rights. The most important of these is the right to survival, to protection from the dangers which one has fled, and to the security of knowing one will not be returned to those dangers.

Mindful of the plight of dislocated people following World War II, the United Nations in 1951 defined a refugee as:

"any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. . . or is unwilling to return to it" (United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees).

While the UN definition is accurate in regard to some of the world's refugees, it is also too narrow to address many other refugee situations. In 1969, the Organization of African Unity expanded the definition of refugees to include anyone compelled to leave his/her country because of "external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disrupting the public order." In practice, many international humanitarian agencies such as Oxfam America consider as refugees all those forced to flee their native land in order to survive.

When a government decides that someone is a refugee, that decision often implies a criticism of the government of the country from which the person has fled. Thus, the granting of refugee status

Kampuchea, OA photo

turns all too easily into a foreign policy issue. For example, the United States normally grants refugee status to people coming from countries the U.S. considers hostile. At the same time, the U.S. often refuses refugee status to people coming from countries whose governments the U.S. considers friendly. In recent years, the U.S. has granted unrestricted refugee status to Vietnamese and Cuban "boat people," while denying refugee status to most Haitian "boat people," despite the fact that these Haitians are fleeing a homeland which is as poor and repressive as any in the world. This discriminating double standard allows the United States to embarrass the governments of Vietnam and Cuba, while avoiding criticism of an at least equally repressive, yet friendly, government in Haiti. In this way, people fleeing oppression become the pawns of foreign policy concerns rather than the subjects of humanitarian consideration.

II. The Numbers Game

If deciding who is a refugee is often a political word game, determining how many refugees are in a particular country is also a self-serving issue for some governments and agencies. Statistics on the number of refugees anywhere are usually unreliable because governments and agencies may inflate such figures in order to win political or economic support for themselves. Thus, figures for the same refugee population often vary considerably, depending upon the source of the figures. While the government of Somalia in 1981 claimed as many as 1.3 million refugees within its borders, independent sources counted approximately 700,000. Claiming a larger number of refugees would permit the Somali government to argue for increased international aid to Somalia while also embarrassing a neighboring country, Ethiopia, with which Somalia was engaged in a border war.

Despite the numbers game, some facts and trends in the world refugee crisis are disturbingly clear. The situation is getting worse, both in the number of people becoming refugees and in the treatment accorded refugees. The United Nations estimates that during 1981 as many as 2,000 more persons became refugees every day. Most refugees (80 percent) end up in

poorer Third World countries, not in wealthier countries or developed regions. Most refugees (90 percent in some areas) are women and children under fifteen years of age and a disproportionate number of the world's refugees (perhaps more than half) are children under sixteen years of age. On the following pages are some widely accepted estimates of the numbers of refugees in different world regions.

III. The Survival Game

For most refugees, mere survival is a deadly game they can lose on any turn. Host governments may be more interested in returning refugees than in giving them asylum. Mexican officials were routinely deporting Guatemalan refugees back to nearly certain death in Guatemala, until local and international pressures decreased the practice. Refugees may find themselves labelled as "subversives," a particularly brutal aspect of the word game, a label which all too often sanctions harrassment, torture and murder of refugees by government forces acting in the name of national security. For example, military personnel from El Salvador have killed many Salvadoran refugees along the Salvadoran border in Honduras, claiming that the refugees are subversives.

Even without the dangers of harrassment, deportation, or worse, survival is never easy for most refugees. For example, government officials and local profiteers may routinely engage in extortion and black market operations among refugee populations, peddling food and medicine at inflated prices, even if such necessities were intended as free aid. Occasionally, refugees themselves may engage in black market practices in an effort to survive and to better their situation at the expense of other refugees.

Even if no one attempts to exploit their misery, most refugees must struggle to survive in squalid, crowded camps amid hardships such as these:

"During the early days in the camp, life was very bad. There was very little food, no clean water and a lot of diseases. Many people died." (refugee in a camp in Somalia)

Somalia, OA photo

Honduras, OA photo

Such conditions inevitably lead to acute emotional trauma:

"They've been grabbed in the night, given over to soldiers and have been killed. Children are disappearing. One of the doctors told me that of all of the problems that they have, the biggest is tension. They just don't know where they are going to get hit from next" (U.S. missionary working with Salvadoran refugees in Honduras).

"One detainee became so obsessed with a conviction that his family in El Salvador was starving that he could not eat" (Gary MacEoin and Nivita Riley, No Promised Land, Oxfam America Report).

"The torture is not that they are tortured... they are not badly treated.

WORLD REFUGEE MOVEMENT

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT REFUGEE SITUATIONS — 1982

EL SALVADOR: 250,000 in Belize, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, and United States

GUATEMALA: 150,000 in United States, 30,000 in Mexico, also numbers in Costa Rica, Honduras

HAITI: 40,029 in United States (legal entrants), also other significant numbers in Canada and United States

ETHIOPIA: 700,000 in Somalia
350,000 in Sudan

AFGHANISTAN: 2.3 million in Pakistan

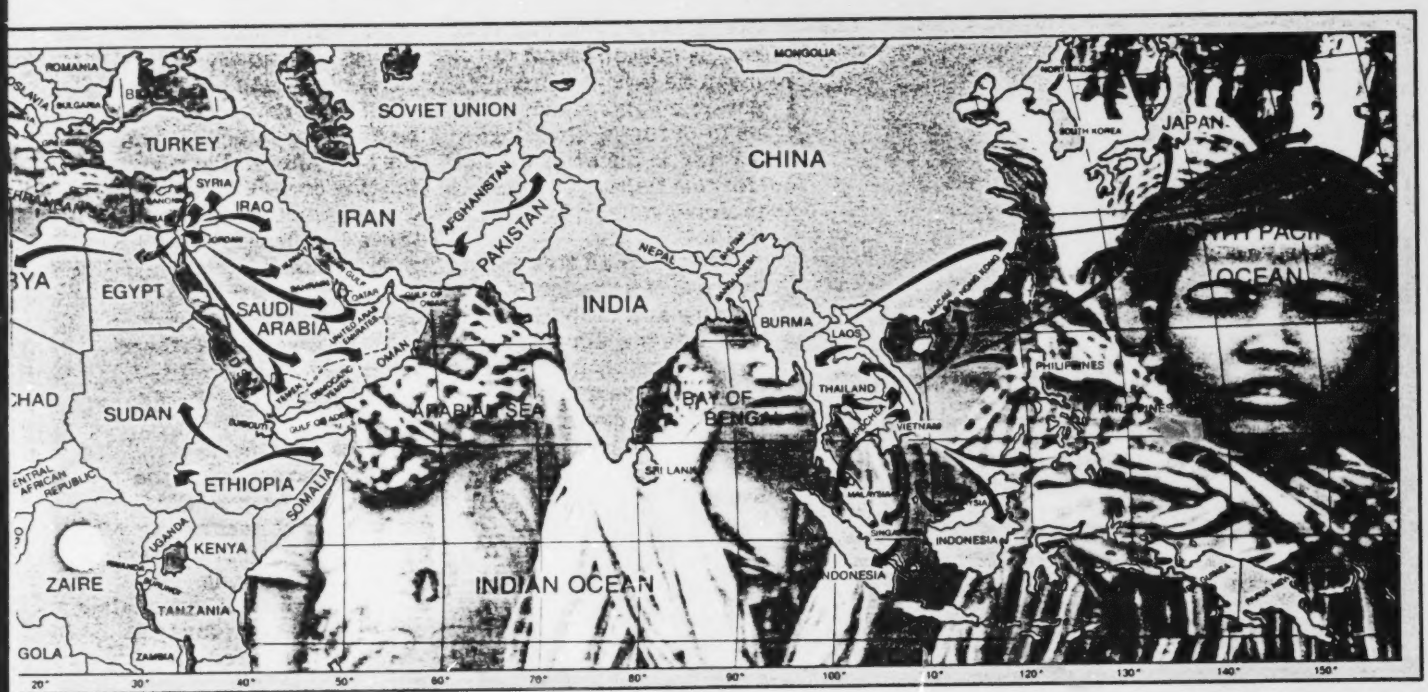
PALESTINIANS:
2,100 in Bahrain
45,600 in Egypt
451,000 in Gaza
20,600 in Iraq
550,800 in Israel
1,148,300 in Jordan
299,700 in Kuwait
358,200 in Lebanon
23,700 in Libya
50,700 in Oman
24,200 in Qatar
136,000 in Saudi Arabia
222,500 in Syria
36,500 in United Arab Emirates
104,800 in United States
833,000 in West Bank
140,100 Other

It is that they are doing nothing. They tell me, 'I am like an animal'," (Director of the Puerto Rico Council for Haitian Refugees describing condition of Haitian refugees in Fort Allen Detention Center, Puerto Rico).

Severed from familiar support and surroundings, most refugees must deal with a profound sense of helplessness:

"People lose a sense of control over their lives. They are given everything or not given it. . . Helplessness eventually becomes a learned habit unless something is done to help them become self-reliant again" (Oxfam America Project Officer in Somalia).

One key to the survival game, then, is for the refugee to keep alive some sense of self-reliance and community. A fish net



Map Design: Jerry Alexander

REFUGEE TOTALS — 1981

VIETNAM:
7,300 in Thailand
10,000 in Malaysia
2,000 in Japan
3,400 in Philippines
31,000 in Hong Kong
4,000 in Indonesia
408,000 in United States
2,700 in Singapore
2,600 in Macau

LAOS:
86,300 in Thailand
13,400 in United States

KAMPUCHEA:
88,400 in Thailand
800 in Malaysia
80,000 in United States
10,400 in Laos
35,000 in Viet Nam

Africa	2,251,600
Asia	954,700
Europe	613,200
Latin America	388,700
Middle East	4,637,200
North America	1,187,000
Total	10,032,400

Sources: United States Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey*, 1981 and 1982
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *UNHCR Information*, July 1982-No. 4
Middle East, July 1982
United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, September 30, 1982

may mean as much for life tomorrow as a food ration means today:

"In a Kampuchean refugee camp in Thailand, hundreds of Khmers waited stoically and quietly for their daily food ration. When fish nets were distributed, however, they burst into cheers" (Oxfam America staff member).

So, too, a sense of community can imply a future:

"Closeness and mutual understanding were obvious parts of their community. We observed the men and boys gathering at dawn to care for a tomato garden of 3,000 plants" (American Friends Service Committee Field Consultant describing a refugee camp in Honduras).

In addition, poor people and communities in host countries often help poor

Kampuchea, OA photo

people in their midst—as Honduran peasants have helped Salvadoran refugees:

"Honduras is a very poor country, and this particular area of Honduras is the poorest. The people just gave everything that they had . . . They just gave all of the food they had . . . (U.S. missionary in Honduras).

Sometimes such help is given at great personal risk:

"I had one case about six months ago with a guy 75 years old, who had twenty refugees in his house. One day, ten armed soldiers came up to his house and wanted to pull out the refugees. And when they pull them out, they take them up to the river and kill them. The old guy comes walking out and says, 'This is Honduras and this is my house. I run this house and you get lost.' And they left" (U.S. missionary in Honduras).

IV. The Tug of War

Two sets of forces act together to cause people to become refugees: those forces which make living intolerable in a person's homeland, such as economic oppression, political repression, war, violence and natural disaster; and those which attract people to another land, such as a perception of better opportunities or a better life elsewhere.

A. The Push

Economic oppression, political repression, violence, war and natural disaster can combine in various ways to force people to leave their homeland, as situations in Haiti, Kampuchea and West Africa illustrate.

Haiti. The World Bank estimates that three out of four Haitians live in "conditions of absolute poverty which means the overwhelming majority of Haitians cannot afford what is considered the minimum standard consumption of food." Daily caloric intake in Haiti remains among the lowest in the entire world, and more than 60 percent of all Haitian children suffer from malnutrition. Haiti's infant mortality rate is one of the highest in the world. And political repression feeds on economic deprivation:

"A man can casually say he is hungry, and that can be misconstrued to mean he is criticizing governmental mismanagement of funds, therefore leading to his arrest" (former Haitian political prisoner now living in the U.S.).

On top of all this, overuse of some lands by hungry and desperate peasants has added to severe erosion and more famine. To people living under such conditions, a perilous sea journey of 700 miles to the United States may seem an acceptable risk when compared to life in Haiti.

Kampuchea. Political repression and war combined in Kampuchea to make daily life impossible. The political repression of the Khmer Rouge period, coupled with the chaos following the Vietnamese invasion of the country in December, 1978, disrupted the seasonal rhythm of planting and harvesting to the extent that peasants could not get rice seedlings into the ground for the main season harvest in 1979. The resulting food shortages reached famine proportions by August, 1979, and drove thousands of Kampucheans into Thailand in search of relief aid.

West Africa: The Sahel. Although the drought which struck part of West Africa in 1968–74 was a natural occurrence, its impact on the local cattle-herding population was aggravated by man-made economic factors beyond the herders' control. A small minority of farmers, traders and politicians in the region had created an economy which emphasized the production of peanuts for export, using the best land in the region for this crop. When the drought struck, rising taxes and prices, along with shrinking incomes, drove farmers to expand their peanut production into the grasslands where the herders had traditionally brought their herds during droughts. The farmers' expansion blocked the routes of the herders. Moreover, the expansion of peanut production aggravated the drought conditions because, unlike traditional root crops grown for food in the region, peanuts must be uprooted when harvested, exposing the

Ethiopia, UNICEF/Adrian Clark

land to wind erosion. The herders lost many of their cattle to starvation, and were themselves reduced to living on food handouts in overcrowded refugee camps.

Somalia, OA photo

B. The Pull

The perception that life may be better in another country can also be a powerful reason to leave one's homeland. Often, those who leave for such a reason have more education, professional skills, work abilities or other assets which they can readily take with them. For most refugees, however, the attraction of a higher standard of living is a secondary concern. Foremost in the refugee's mind is the sheer need to escape war, political or economic oppression, or natural disaster. Above all, refugees leave in order to survive. For the economic immigrant, the future looks hopeful, perhaps even bright. For the true refugee, the future may seem to offer little more than hardship and threat.

V. Getting Out of the Game

For most refugees, returning to a normal life means repatriation or resettlement.

Repatriation means returning to one's homeland if and when conditions permit. In Zimbabwe, 250,000 persons who fled to neighboring Black African countries during the last years of white minority rule and civil war in that country have now returned to their homeland. Successful reintegration of these people into the social and economic life of the nation remains a critical task facing Zimbabwe today. Some returnees have formed agricultural cooperatives to manage formerly white-owned commercial farms. In 1981–82, Oxfam America provided nearly $34,000 to the Batsiranai Farm Cooperative, a model of its kind.

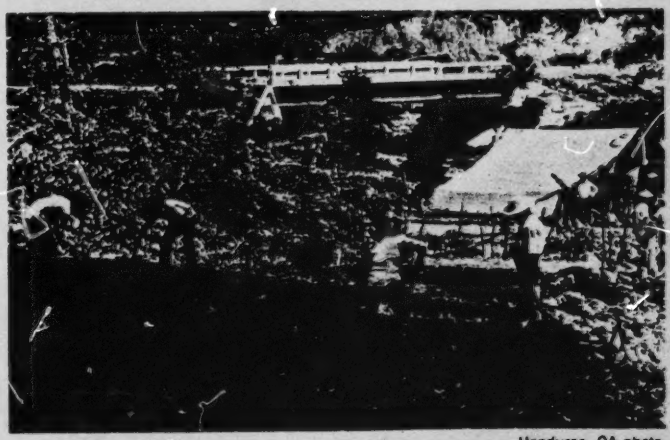
Resettlement means remaining permanently in the country to which one has fled. Initially, the situation of resettled refugees may require large amounts of assistance, but helping them to become self-reliant as quickly as possible is a major goal of organizations such as Oxfam America. While also providing emergency aid to refugees in Somalia, Oxfam America supplied $153,000 for the purchase of simple technology (solar-powered water pumps) which relieved a critical water shortage and helped the refugees to grow food to feed themselves.

Too many refugees, however, are never fully repatriated or fully resettled. Instead, they may wait for years in a limbo of camps or detention areas. Sometimes this is because a government lacks the resources to rapidly integrate large numbers of refugees into the life of the nation. Often, however, host governments have a particular political, military, or economic interest in keeping large refugee settlements intact. For example, the Thai government saw Khmer refugee settlements near its eastern borders as a buffer zone against possible military invasion from Kampuchea or Vietnam.

VI. Ending the Game: How U.S. Citizens Can Help Refugees

Ending the deadly games which the powerful play with the lives of refugees means shifting the treatment of refugees from a political to a humanitarian basis. This includes changing current United States refugee policies so that such policies are based on humanitarian rather than on narrow foreign policy interests. It also includes eliminating U.S. military aid to governments whose repressive practices force people to leave their homeland. Instead, the U.S. government should be encouraged to grant economic aid to countries whose governments are sincerely trying to better the lives of their people. U.S. aid should not be used as a weapon to reward "friendly" governments and to punish "unfriendly" governments. Helping refugees also includes working to eliminate the double standard in U.S. immigration and refugee practices.

But while you are working to effect good policies, refugees must survive. Some humanitarian agencies such as Oxfam America are also helping them survive today.



Honduras, OA photo

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Somalia, OA photo

Ideas for Action

Show a film or organize a teach-in on the worldwide problem of refugees. Educate yourself and your community on the economic and political causes of the crisis and the impact of U.S. foreign policy. Oxfam America distributes several good audio-visual presentations on refugees in specific countries:

El Salvador: Nowhere to Run—a 27-minute videotape produced by Oxfam America on Salvadoran refugees in Honduras.

Guatemala Testimonies—a 23-minute videotape produced by Skylight Pictures, provides firsthand evidence of the violence which has driven Guatemalans from their homeland.

Lebanon: Plea for the Innocent—a 15-minute slide-tape presentation produced by the American Friends Service Committee.

Other films are available from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), UN Headquarters, Room C301, New York, NY 10017.

Write to newspapers and your Congressional Representatives expressing concern about U.S. refugee policy, and asking for even-handed treatment of all applicants for asylum no matter what their country of origin may be. For more information on this issue read, NO PROMISED LAND: AMERICAN REFUGEE POLICY AND THE RULE OF LAW, by Gary MacEoin and Nivita Riley (see Further Reading). For up-to-date information on U.S. immigration policy and the situation facing particular groups contact the National Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Forum, 833 8th Street, Washington, DC 20003. They also publish information on the economic and political causes of refugee migration and are a good general clearinghouse on the entire issue.

Learn about refugees in your own community. They may be a valuable source of information and perhaps be interested in your work. Recognize that they may be cautious for fear that their activities may result in their deportation and/or endanger the lives of family members in their native countries.

Organize a fundraising event to support one of Oxfam America's refugee assistance projects. Contact us for a speaker and other materials (copies of this paper are available at a bulk rate of 20¢/copy). You may also wish to organize a benefit for one of the organizations working on behalf of refugees in the United States. The legal costs incurred by some of these groups in their struggles with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service are very high. Contact the National Forum (see above) for information on who is doing what and how you can help.

Further Reading

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World Hunger Education Service, **Refugees: Floodtide in the Eighties.** Hunger Notes, August 1981. 12 pp. Available from World Hunger Education Service, 2000 P Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036.

Oxfam America is an international development and disaster relief organization based in Boston. Oxfam America was founded in 1970 and is one of six autonomous Oxfams, including two in Canada and one each in Great Britain, Australia and Belgium. The name "Oxfam" came from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, founded in England in 1942. Building self-reliance is our most important goal. We fund local, grassroots groups in 21 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the United States, Oxfam America works to inform policymakers and the general public about the root causes of world hunger and poverty. Oxfam America neither seeks nor accepts government funds, but relies entirely upon private institutions and citizens.